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ESSAY

Haig's Pinch

By William Safire

WASHINGTON — Get out your yellow pad and put yourself in the loafers of the President-elect as he weighs the pros and cons of his choice for Secretary of State.

One name that appears on the final four-name short list is General Alexander M. Haig Jr., former Deputy to National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, former Army Vice Chief of Staff, former White House Chief of Staff, former NATO commander, former man on slow horseback.

The assets are impressive:

1. *Demonstrated bravery.* The Distinguished Service Cross is not handed out lightly: Al Haig was a genuine hero in the battle of Au Gap, early in the Vietnam War. In addition, he won a battlefield promotion to colonel of an infantry battalion for leading troops in An Loc. Performance in combat — coolness under fire — is an important criterion in judging any man's qualification for a job in the storm center.

2. *Well-regarded by allies.* After arranging for the resignation of Nixon, Haig was assigned by President Ford to the top military post in Europe. As NATO's Supreme Commander, he won the respect of most of our allies for his intelligence, political sagacity and forcefulness. Europeans are familiar with Haig and would be comforted by his appointment.

3. *Firm grasp of the strategic threat.* When he resigned from his NATO job last year to test the political waters back home, Haig recommended that the Senate hold the SALT II treaty in abeyance while its flaws were renegotiated. He was especially critical of an agreement permitting the Soviet backfire bomber and SS-20 missiles to "run free" while limits were placed on our cruise missiles. He was tough on SALT before Afghanistan.

4. *Experienced cultivator of opinion-makers.* Many of the books and articles about the last days in the Nixon White House drew on details supplied — on deep background — by Haig or his assistants; as a result, most accounts gratefully portrayed Haig as the de facto President, saving the country from the potential thrashing about of a wounded leader. Though Nixon loyalists fumed, practical politicians admired Haig's ability to extricate himself with praise from the key writers.

Liabilities of a Haig appointment are also to be considered.

1. *Sycophancy footwork.* Haig is the only four-star general never to have

the sponsorship of Henry Kissinger, who appreciated an efficient order-follower who would coolly tolerate the most demeaning bullying. Like a Gilbert and Sullivan admiral, Haig knew how to polish the top-brass handles of the Oval Office door.

2. *The 17 illegal wiretaps.* Because of a personal interest in the 1969-71 eavesdropping on newsmen and White House aides, I asked William Sullivan of the F.B.I. in 1974 who was the man who transmitted the White House request for the unlawful surveillance, and who reviewed the transcripts. The reply: "Colonel Haig." When asked to say it wasn't so, my former colleague said of the tapping: "It never gave me gas pains." To this date, Al Haig has never been reprimanded for — or shown any remorse for — his intimate role in this perversion of the national security power. (I have forgiven him, but whenever there is a click on my phone, I cannot help saying "Hi, Al.")

3. *Trotting out the tapes.* At confirmation hearings, any embarrassing moments on the Nixon tapes involving Al Haig are sure to be publicly played. A few apple-polishing remarks are already known — "Only you, Mr. President" — but Haig assures friends that no substantive improprieties will be revealed. Before making any decision, Governor Reagan will have to make certain that Haig's recollection is accurate and consider if he wants any Watergate-era associations attached to his Secretary of State. (John Connally also had this problem; Shultz and Weinberger did not.)

4. *Running for President from State.* Al Haig still wants to run for President; as Ronald Reagan must be the first to know, that is not an ignoble ambition. The question is: Does Reagan want a man at State afflicted with the need to factor his political future into his diplomatic recommendations?

Now put down your Haig yellow pad. Pick up similar rundowns on the pros and cons of other panel-recommended "finalists": George Shultz, who has asked that his name be withdrawn but who was told to take that up with Reagan directly; William Casey, who is everybody's choice for C.I.A. chief but is showing late strength in the choice for State; and Casper Weinberger, who is closest of all to Reagan.

Add to that list Henry Jackson, who would contribute that note of unlike-mindedness on domestic affairs, so needed among the top handful. At the highest level, good-soldierliness is an overrated virtue; it would be as much of a mistake for Reagan to put a military mind at the head of State as it would be for him to put his personal lawyer at the head of the Justice Department.

Where does a Cabinetmaker come out? In the case of Haig, his assets far outweigh his liabilities — for Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, for chief SALT negotiator, for Ambassador to NATO or Moscow, or to command a military-political operation to provide Iran with a suitable trade for the hostages. Not for